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Don’t Give Up the Fight

Don’t lose heart, my fellow Jews. Speak, write, mobilize, shout. Raise holy hell. Your strength is greater than you realize.

By Kathleen Hayes

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For twenty-five years, I was a member of a far-left Trotskyist organization and a vitriolic anti-Zionist. I’ve written about this elsewhere and generally try not to repeat myself, but want to tell a different aspect of the story for the sake of a point I’ve never made explicitly. Today I’ve repudiated the antisemitism of those years, embraced my Jewish identity, and am a grateful member of the incredibly accepting Jewish community. I’m completely committed to Israel, which I hope to be visiting for the first time next week. And I owe it all to Jews who refused to shut up about antisemitism.

I was living in London when I quit that Trotskyist party, in 2016. I left it not because I had any specific political differences, but because I no longer knew what I believed. I’d repeated the party line for so many years, my own thoughts and feelings were off limits to me. I still craved involvement in leftwing politics however, and immediately joined the British Labour Party. A messianic fervor swirled around its then-leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and I longed to be one of his acolytes.

When I first read that Comrade Jeremy and other Labour members were being accused of antisemitism, I did what any good leftist would do: I swore it was slander, lobbed by nasty right-wingers to destroy the left. I continued to insist this for many months, suppressing any niggling doubts. Everyone I knew and respected was outraged that our champions of the oppressed were being charged with antisemitism. It was unthinkable that they — and I — were wrong about something so huge and ugly. I tried to shove the matter into a distant part of my brain.

But eventually the noise was overwhelming. Almost every time I picked up my beloved Guardian newspaper, which was otherwise mostly hostile to Jews and Israel, I found another article about a new claim of antisemitism in the Labour Party. Sometimes an opinion piece by an anti-Corbyn Jew even made it in. British Jews held demonstrations, appeared on talk shows. Finally the BBC aired a documentary called “Is Labour Antisemitic?” I watched it twice, then decided to do something radical: I decided to fact-check my beliefs. It was extremely hard to keep reading when I realized that the online British publication I’d stumbled on, Fathom Journal, was Zionist: so thoroughly had I been brainwashed to believe that Zionists were

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But I read on, one devastating fact after another, until an earthquake careened through my head and I realized with horror: I have been totally wrong.

None of this would have happened if it weren't for the tenacity of British Jews. I didn't want to go poking under rocks: I knew that challenging the left on antisemitism, or even asking unseemly questions, would make me the left's enemy, leading to exile from my political home. But these Jews wouldn't allow me to ignore them. They wrote and marched, yelled and spoke and were basically completely obstreperous until uncomfortable seeds of doubt were planted in my head. In the end they not only convinced me and, undoubtedly, others; but they helped ensure Corbyn would lose his position of political power and become widely, if not universally, disgraced in British society. Today antisemitic rampages are a regular feature of British life and its Jews are again (or still) under attack, but they fight on. We should acknowledge victories when they happen, and Britain's Jews scored some big ones. They never gave up, and that's why I'm here today.

Today the antisemitism is so impossibly putrid and pervasive, it's tempting to think there's no point in fighting it. These people are so hate-filled, irrational and vile, the thinking goes, it's foolish to believe they could ever be convinced to see the error of their ways. Better, the argument continues, to sink more deeply into the Jewish community, fighting the hate with Jewish self-love rather than taking on antisemitism directly. I have mixed feelings about this. On the one hand I think it's essential to not be so single-mindedly focused on antisemitism that you lose sight of the beauty and wisdom of Jewishness, itself. I credit Dara Horn with setting me straight when I first started confronting the bigotry I'd contributed to all those years. To paraphrase, if you can name almost all the Nazi death camps but not a single Yiddish author, you have a blinkered idea of what it is to be Jewish. This comment of Horn's made me realize that while I'd become fairly knowledgeable about Jew-hate, I knew very little about Jews themselves. I started exploring my own Jewish identity and my life is all the richer for it.

So I'm a big believer in people nourishing themselves on whatever it is they love about being Jewish — whether that means religious observance or the more secular side of Jewish life. Keep yourself fulfilled and your people will benefit from it. But also: Fight antisemitism. Use whatever platform you have. Issue documentaries, podcasts, op-eds. Speak up at work, school, on social media. Personally I don't bother with people who call me a baby-killer on X, but I salute those with more pugilist spirits than I have. You may never convince them, although I wouldn't say it's impossible; I, more than most people, know better. And you don't know the full impact of your words and actions.

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number of impassioned individuals can do monstrous things when the majority have no conviction.

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," W.B. Yeats wrote. He was commenting in 1919 but it could have been today, when throughout the West, universities, city streets, museums and other institutions are besieged by mobs outraged that the Jews have a state. The haters are a minority, but history shows a tiny number of impassioned individuals can do monstrous things when the majority have no conviction. That's why it's so important to fight: not so much for the pogromists, who are likely unreachable, but to make the passive majority uneasy. To make them ask questions. To go poking under rocks. To realize, ultimately, that they must defend Jews, along with the precious Western liberal values now under assault. Victories are not only possible, but inevitable. Whether it will be enough is up to us.

So don't lose heart, my fellow Jews. Speak, write, mobilize, shout. Raise holy hell. Your strength is greater than you realize.

Kathleen Hayes *is the author of "Antisemitism and the Left: A Memoir."*

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